

Department of Veterans Affairs

§ 1.556

request to another component or agency, the FOIA Officer will notify the requester in writing of the referral and provide the requester the name and contact information of the entity to which the request has been referred, after consulting with the entity to which the request is to be referred to ensure that the request is being referred to the correct entity. If only part of the request was referred, the FOIA Officer will inform the requester and identify the referred part at the time of the referral or in the final response.

[76 FR 51894, Aug. 19, 2011]

§ 1.556 Timing of responses to requests.

(a) *General.* Components ordinarily shall respond to requests according to their order of receipt and within the time frames established under the FOIA. If a request for expedited processing is granted in accordance with paragraph (d) of this section, such request will be processed prior to requests in either of the tracks described in paragraph (b) of this section.

(b) *Multitrack processing.* (1) VA will use two processing tracks in addressing a request for records: Simple and complex, based upon the amount of work and/or time needed to process the request, including consideration of the number of pages involved.

(2) The FOIA Officer shall advise the requester of the track into which the request has been placed and of the criteria of the faster track. The FOIA Officer will provide requesters in the slower track the opportunity to limit the scope of their requests in order to qualify for processing in the faster track. The FOIA Officer may contact the requester either by telephone or in writing, whichever the FOIA Officer determines is most efficient and expeditious; telephonic communication will be documented.

(c) *Unusual circumstances.* (1) FOIA Officers may encounter “unusual circumstances,” where it is not possible to meet the statutory time limits for processing the request. In such cases, the FOIA Officer will extend the twenty (20)-business day time limit for ten (10) more business days and notify the requester in writing of the unusual cir-

cumstances and of the date by which it expects to complete processing of the request. Where the extension is for more than ten (10) business days, the FOIA Officer will provide the requester with an opportunity to either modify the request so that it may be processed within the time limits or to arrange an alternative time period with the FOIA Officer for processing the request or a modified request. Unusual circumstances consist of the following:

(i) The need to search for and collect the requested records from field facilities or other components other than the office processing the request;

(ii) The need to search for, collect and examine a voluminous amount of separate and distinct records that are the subject of a single request; or

(iii) The need for consultation with two or more components or another agency having a substantial interest in the subject matter of a request.

(2) Where the FOIA Officer reasonably believes that certain requests from the same requester, or a group of requesters acting in concert, actually constitute the same request that would otherwise satisfy the unusual circumstances specified in this paragraph, and the requests involve clearly related matters, the FOIA Officer may aggregate those requests. Multiple requests involving unrelated matters will not be aggregated.

(d) *Expedited processing.* (1) Requests will be processed out of the order in which they were received by the component responsible for processing the FOIA request and given expedited treatment when VA determines that:

(i) The failure to obtain the requested records on an expedited basis could reasonably be expected to pose an imminent threat to the life or physical safety of an individual;

(ii) There is an urgency to inform the public concerning actual or alleged Federal government activity, if the request is made by a person primarily engaged in disseminating information;

(iii) In the discretion of the FOIA Officer, the request warrants such treatment; or

(iv) There is widespread and exceptional interest in which possible questions exist about the government's integrity which affect public confidence.

(2) A requester who is seeking expedited processing must submit a statement, certified to be true to the best of the requester's knowledge and belief, providing a detailed basis for how there is a compelling need. VA may waive the requirement for certification of the statement of compelling need as a matter of administrative discretion.

(3) Within ten (10) calendar days of its receipt of a request for expedited processing, the FOIA Officer shall determine whether to grant the request and will provide the requester written notice of the decision. If the FOIA Officer grants a request for expedited processing, the FOIA Officer shall give the request priority and process it as soon as practicable. If the FOIA Officer denies the request for expedited processing, the requester may appeal the denial, which appeal shall be addressed expeditiously.

[76 FR 51894, Aug. 19, 2011]

§ 1.557 Responses to requests.

(a) *Acknowledgement of requests.* When a request for records is received by a component designated to receive requests, the component's FOIA Officer will assign a request number for future reference and send the requester a written acknowledgement of receipt.

(b) *Processing of requests.* Upon receipt of a perfected request by the appropriate component, the FOIA Officer will make a reasonable effort to search for records responsive to the request. The FOIA Officer ordinarily will include as responsive those records in its possession and control as of the date the search for responsive records began. This includes searching for records in electronic form or format, unless to do so would interfere significantly with the agency's automated information systems. If fees for processing the request are due under § 1.561, the FOIA Officer shall inform the requester of the amount of the fee as provided in § 1.554(e) and § 1.561. When a request is granted in part, the FOIA Officer shall mark, redact, or annotate the records to be released to show the amount of information deleted and, where technically feasible, indicate the exemption at the place of redaction unless doing so would harm an interest protected by an applicable exemption.

The FOIA Officer will provide the records in the form or format sought by the requester, if readily reproducible in that form or format.

(c) *Time limits for processing requests.* Ordinarily, a component will have twenty (20) business days from the date of VA's receipt of the request to make a determination whether to grant the request in its entirety, grant the request in part, or deny the request in its entirety. If the request must be referred to another component, the response time will begin on the date that the request was received by the appropriate component, but in any event not later than ten (10) business days after the referring office receives the FOIA request.

(d) *Adverse determinations of requests.* Whenever a component makes an adverse determination denying the request in any respect, the component FOIA Officer shall promptly notify the requester of the adverse determination in writing. Adverse determinations include the following: A determination to withhold a requested record in whole or in part; a determination that the requested record does not exist or cannot be located; a determination that a record is not readily reproducible in the form or format sought by the requester; a determination that what has been sought is not a record subject to the FOIA; a determination on any disputed fee matter, including the denial of a fee waiver; and a denial of a request for expedited treatment. The adverse determination notice must be signed by the component head or the component's FOIA Officer, and will include the following:

(1) The name and title or position of the person responsible for the adverse determination;

(2) A brief statement of the reason(s) for the denial, including any FOIA exemptions applied by the FOIA Officer in denying the request;

(3) The amount of information withheld in number of pages or other reasonable form of estimation; an estimate is not necessary if the volume is indicated on redacted pages disclosed in part or if providing an estimate would harm an interest provided by an applicable exemption; and